Reform Commission I- New Hope School District White Paper

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**NEW HOPE SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**Maximizing Human Potential Initiative**

**District Description**

The New Hope School District is a small, suburban/rural school district. It is nestled in the north, eastern section of Pennsylvania. The major employment opportunities in the community are Kellogg’s and Nissan. The median household income for this district is $60,700.

The New Hope School District employs 165 professional staff members and 70 support staff members. The enrollment is 2,027 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The elementary school houses kindergarten through 4th grade and has an enrollment of 725 students. It is staffed with one principal, one assistant principal, and one guidance counselor. The middle school comprises grades five through eight and has an enrollment of 614 students. It is staffed with one principal, one assistant principal, and two guidance counselors. The high school has an enrollment of 688 students. It is staffed with one principal, two assistant principals, and two guidance counselors.

The student population consists of 83% regular education students and 17% students identified with a learning disability. 81% of the New Hope students are white, 10% are black, 1.5% are Native American, 2.5% are Asian, and 5% are Hispanic or Latino.

English is the first language at home for 79% of the students. Spanish is the first language for 19% of the students and German is the home language for 2% of students. 4.9% of the students are limited English proficient. The student mobility rate is 3/3%.

Traditions and a commitment to the community culture are evident in this district. The school community is considered a family or a team.

In 2009-2010 the district operated on a budget of $30 million dollars. For the 2010-2011 school year, the district is operating on a budget of $25 million. Per pupil expenditure is $11, 695. The average class size is 23 students with a student/computer ration of 3:1. Attendance rate is 94.6%. Graduation rate is 93.3% and the dropout rate is 1.7%.

The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment mandates the assessment each year of every child in mathematics and reading in 3rd through eighth grades and eleventh grade. Every child is assessed in writing in the fourth, eighth, and eleventh grades.

**Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses & Threats**

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| --- | --- |
| Strengths | Opportunities |
| Tradition of excellence | Increasing population of retirements/hiring of new teachers |
| Parent involvement | Strong athletic, arts, and club programs |
| High expectations of professional growth through education/training of teachers | Corporations within school district |
| Competitive salary | Parent volunteers |
| 90% of graduates go to post secondary education | Staff/Administration communication |
| Opportunities for students to be civically involved | Full day kindergarten |
| Residents proud of community | Scheduling |
| Supportive, proactive, decisive town council | New initiatives for new assessment methods |
| Parent involvement |  |
| Strong school traditions/School spirit |  |
| High standardized test scores |  |
| Culturally strong ethnic groups/community |  |

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| --- | --- |
| Weaknesses | Threats |
| Divided school board (fiscally) | Merit pay/teachers threatened by test results |
| Over involved School Board | Closing of small business plants |
| Blanketed directives/policies from School Board | Budget (state and local) |
| Outdated technology and resources | Cut in programs, personnel |
| Summative assessment is primary method of assessment | Global changes |
| Student data not driving instruction | Traditions holding back progress |
| Outdated curriculum/textbooks | Family stress levels/life styles |
| Mixed population of the economic disadvantage and affluent | Foreclosures |
| Insufficient professional development | Parents dictating policy |
| Outdated facilities in need of renovation | Haves and have-nots |
| Growing problems with drugs, gangs, bullying, and violence | Time testing/teaching to the test |
|  | Time stolen due to NCLB |
|  | Federal and state mandates without funding |
|  | Pay to play |

Vision Statement:

At New Hope School District all decisions, policies and resources support engaged learning and student achievement in an environment that promotes personal excellence, respect, diversity and civic responsibility every day to enable students to become contributing members of society and successful participants in the global economy.

Mission Statement:

The New Hope School District is an organization of caring professionals committed to providing a safe, student-centered learning environment that ensures each child has an opportunity to create his/her destiny through collaboration with families and the community.

**ISLLC Standards Components Addressed by Professional Learning Communities/WFSG**

**Standard 2:** A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff development programs.

The maximizing human potential initiative can span across the three ISLLC standards which have been discussed previously in this paper, but standard two encompasses the majority of the professional learning community development identified. Through the creation of professional learning communities, New Hope School District will be able to target instructional programs and the current school culture through an in-house professional development initiative.

Statement of Problem

The NATC reform commission’s initial assessment of the New Home School District includes an assessment of the District’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT). The SWOT identified key areas of weakness in the professional development of the faculty and staff and the lack of student data to drive instruction. One of the strengths of the District was the high expectations that the current staff establish for themselves and their continued professional development. The District was in need of an initiative that maximized the use of their current faculty and staff while at the same time targeted data driven decision making. The recommended initiative was the creation and implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC), specifically, Whole Faculty Study Groups, throughout the District.

Professional Learning Communities Initiative Review of Literature

Researchers state that effective teacher collaboration is essential to improve instructional practices. (Annenberg, 2004) Max Thompson and the Learning Focused Schools program mandate instructional collaboration between teachers as an essential component of the programs successful implementation. Many schools across the country have followed these recommendations of creating collaboration time among teachers. A nationwide study found that 69% of teachers in the United States have regular meetings with their peers. (Parsad, Lewis & Farris, 2001)

Administrators often struggle with creating a schedule that enables common planning times or collaboration times but come to realize that scheduling is the easy part of implementing effective teacher collaboration. Often when teachers start to hold their initial collaboration sessions they do not possess the training needed to facilitate effective meetings that result in instructional improvement or create a professional learning community. These meetings regularly become social gatherings where teachers vent about school, students, and administrators. The unproductive meetings usually cause the teachers to leave feeling like they wasted time when they could have been working in their classroom.

Professional learning communities serve as vessels to extend teacher collaboration beyond that of peer meetings in order to provide focused discussions targeted at improving instructional practices and student learning. Through the creation of collaborative teams throughout a school/district, professional staff members work together to utilize student data and instructional best practices in order to target specific areas of need throughout the institution (Piercey, 2010). The creation of professional learning communities requires a change in attitude and leadership styles between teachers and administrators. Professional learning communities function as a democratic entity where all members have a say in the decision making practices. Administrators who attempt to implement a top-down decision making process in professional learning communities will hinder and limit the success of the groups.

Professional learning communities are not short term committees that disband after their single task has been completed. These learning communities are comprised of small groups of teachers who are working together for continuous instructional and learning improvements (Dufour, 2010). Members of the professional learning communities focus on the use of formative assessment data to drive educational best practices throughout their school. The look of professional learning community may vary between school district, schools, and even specialized departments. It is the responsibility of the educational leaders and teachers to determine the best style of professional learning community that will work for their school/district.

One popular form of professional learning community that has a proven record of success over the last eighteen years is the Whole Faculty Study Group. Whole faculty study groups were developed by Carlene Murphy in 1987(Murphy & Lick, 2005). Whole faculty study groups involve all members of a school divided in groups of three to five members per group who are focused on using student data to drive instructional needs. The two guiding principles of whole faculty study groups are (Murphy & Lick, 2005):

1. What do students need for teacher to do so that teachers have a deeper

understanding of what they teach?

2. What do students need for teacher to do so that teachers will be more skillful

in how they teach.

Whole faculty study groups are not comprised of a specific program or initiative, but serve as a vehicle that enables teachers to work together to use job embedded techniques that target student learning and success. The whole faculty study groups work is guided by seven steps which help facilitate the targeted changes. The whole faculty study group process is cyclical. The seven steps are as follows (Murphy & Lick, 2006):

1. Analyze student data
2. Identify student needs
3. Categorize student needs
4. Complete individual action plan
5. WFSG designs action plan
6. WFSG implements the action research
7. The entire faculty of a school/district analyzes the impact of the action plan

Professional learning communities/whole faculty study groups focus on the importance of teacher collaboration and teacher learning as ways to stimulate educational reform. Over the last ten years, research has started to focus on the importance of teacher collaboration as a catalyst for reform, which is a relatively new approach compared to traditional reform efforts in the history of educational change.

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement Newsletter from March 2007 contained the article titled; *Maximizing the Impact of Teacher Collaboration,* addresses the issues of ineffective collaboration practices. The article identified three basic roadblocks that prevent effective collaboration (The Center, 2007): 1. Some teachers do not like to work with other teachers and fear judgment from others. 2. The lack of focus and off-task behaviors during meetings. 3. Many teachers do not realize the work that will be needed to develop the skills needed to establish effective collaborative techniques. The article suggests a way to help breakdown these roadblocks is through the use of Discussion Protocols. Discussion protocols are scripted, focused, talking points and agendas that direct the conversations and encourage self/group reflecting. (The Collaborative, n.d.) The discussion protocols enable the group members to remain on task and improve student learning.

Charlotte Danielson (2007) addressed the need for educators to have focused conversations with their peers to address issues. Danielson (2007) discussed the need for focused discussion in two specific areas of education. The first way is to effectively deal with the demands which are placed on a classroom teacher, not only the mental but also the physical demands of trying to teach alone. It is important for teachers to learn and grow from one another through focused collaborations with colleagues. (Danielson, 2007) Danielson’s Domain 4-Professional Responsibilities stress that highly effective teachers are life-long learners who participate in effective collaboration sessions and professional development opportunities that enable them to enhance not only their own skill but also their colleague’s instructional skills.

In Riordan & da Costa’s (1998) paper on effective teacher collaboration, they discussed their research on collaborative strategies and offered suggestions to aid in the implementation of collaborative teaching and management practices. Riordan & da Costa (1998) discovered there are specific barriers, similar to those discussed in The Center (2007), that often prevent effective collaboration from taking place. The barriers they discussed were grouped into two categories the first being factors that had to be in place before collaboration could be implemented. This category also addressed actions and perceptions that work against collaborative efforts. The second category focused on the causes for negative collaborative results even when the groundwork had been established. Riordan & da Costa (1998) defined the term collaboration as “Work being done among two or more teachers in a climate of trust and openness to scrutiny and criticism.”(p. 3) Collaboration is different than cooperation which can be defined as sharing or working together in friendship. It is important to differentiate between the two because cooperation is often seen in schools but it is not as effective in improving instructional practices as collaboration.

Schmoker (2006) addresses professional learning communities and the need for specific focused collaboration between teachers. Schmoker (2006) states that these meetings minimally must meet twice a month and focus on instructional practices that will result in improved student achievement. The collaborative meetings need to also continually analyze lessons, testing data, and curriculum alignment. Schmoker (2006) states that if professional learning communities and teacher collaboration fail it is due to one or more of the core focuses not being included. The need for effective professional development practices that are on-going and relevant to improving instructional practices are essential before change is evident. Too often professional development opportunities are wasted on “one-shot” trainings or lectures that try to group all teachers in a school district under one umbrella and do not focus on the individual teacher’s subject area of need. Schools that focus on the expertise and knowledge of its teachers and administrators to provide staff development often see an increase in professional improvement than compared to bringing in outside presenters to “train” the staff. (Schmoker, 2006) The Learning Focused Schools program affirms Schmoker’s research by encouraging school districts to send their own personnel to be trained as Learning Focused Schools Instructors. These in-house instructors are then assigned in pairs to train the faculty of their own school district.

Chapter eight in Bransford, Brown, & Cocking’s book How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School (1999) focuses on teacher learning and what is needed for effective collaboration to take place. Throughout the chapter Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (1999) focus on three main areas of teacher learning: 1. School districts need to utilize the expertise of their staff in professional development. 2. Educational psychology issues and teacher learning as related to collaboration. 3. The ineffectiveness of many teacher preparation programs. Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (1999) state that teachers are often open to new learning and will understand and accept new teaching methods when they are presented during trainings, but the teachers will rarely change their pre-existing beliefs about their teaching and student learning once they return to their classroom. One way to overcome this passive defiance is by creating Assessment-Centered Environments in the school. (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999) These assessment-centered environments provide a safe and focused learning environment that builds on implementing new ideas as a group, evaluating the success or failures of a program, and providing feedback to one another. Instead of evaluating individual teachers and teaching methods the whole group evaluates a new program that all the members have tried. This enables the teachers to criticize and share without their feelings being hurt or judged negatively by their peers.

Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (1999) also targeted college teacher preparation programs that are often outdated and do not foster the concept of collaboration to improve instruction. “The components of teacher education programs—collections of courses, field experiences, and student teaching tend to be disjointed. They are often taught or overseen by people who have little ongoing communication with each other. Even when the components are efficiently organized, there may be no shared philosophical base among the faculty. Moreover, grading policies in college classes can undercut collaboration, and students rarely have a chance to form teams that stay together for a significant portion of their education.” (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999) Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (1999) discussed The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1996) research which identified four specific flaws in current teacher preparation programs: 1. There is inadequate time for teachers to learn all the subject matter needed in a four year degree program. 2. The sequence of teacher preparation courses do not overtly connect with each other. 3. Many instructors in teacher preparation courses present the material through lectures or stale teaching that does not model effective teaching practices. 4. The curriculum of many universities focuses on the minimal requirements needed to obtain certification and does not include enough in-depth learning on teaching.

The ineffectiveness of many teacher preparation programs are often seen by school administrators who are challenged with hiring new teachers that are prepared to instruct students on the first day of school. Bransford, Brown, & Cocking’s (1999) research does indicate that through focused professional development and training, teachers can learn to collaborate with peers to improve instruction.

Richard Elmore (2002) in his paper*, Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Achievement; The Imperative for Professional Development in Education,* takes a look at several of the flaws that hinder professional development, student learning and institutional change. Elmore (2002) stresses that in order to change schools; educators need to develop knowledge about the fundamentals of group problem solving and inter-personal skills. This knowledge can be gained through focused in-house professional development that keeps student achievement as the focus. Student achievement cannot improve if the teachers and administrators cannot recognize the “needs” and target change accordingly. Often schools possess, “The culture of passivity and helplessness that pervades many schools, works directly against the possibility of improvement. Schools with weak internal accountability structures assign causality for their success or failure to forces outside their control: the students, their families, the community, the ‘system’.” (Elmore, 2002, p. 30). Only when schools start to acknowledge that their successes and failures are due to internal, controllable attributions will schools begin to improve and target student learning. (Ormrod, 2004). One myth that Elmore (2002) addresses as a contributing factor to ineffective collaboration is the belief that all teachers are equal in their skill and knowledge. This myth undermines the focus of collaboration that builds on the concept that teachers have valuable skills to share with their colleagues and can learn from one another to improve instructional practices. Elmore (2002) concluded that schools can change once administrators and teachers acknowledge there is the need to improve instruction and evaluate current educational practices.

Implementation

The New Hope School District will begin to implement professional learning communities/ WFSG during the 2010-2011 school year. In December 2010, a pilot group of teachers from the District will attend training on Professional learning communities and whole faculty study groups. This core group of teachers will implement whole faculty study groups throughout the District for the remainder of the 2010-2011 school year. In June 2010, the pilot learning community group will share their data with the New Hope School District and community and report on their findings. During the Summer 2011 Professional Development Institute the pilot group will train the remaining teachers and administrators in the District. Full implementation of professional learning communities will commence at the start of the 2011-2012 school year.

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